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Class Sectarianism and Inequality in Northern Ireland

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Class Sectarianism and Inequality in Northern

Ireland

This century has seen the north of Ireland move from being the heartland of industrial capitalism in Ireland to what one economist has labelled a "workhouse economy" almost totally dependent on the annual financial subvention from the British Exchequer.

Since the formation of the Northern Ireland state in 1921 the core industries which had given Belfast its industrial preeminence in Ireland- linen, engineering and shipbuilding were either stagnant or in decline. In the post 1945 period the now-established pattern of British subsidisation was extended to include the Welfare State, National Health Service and a new industrial strategy aimed at attracting the branch plants of multinational corporations.

However, even in the most prosperous periods in the British and world economy, Northern Ireland did not shift from its position as the poorest region in the UK. A combination of political instability and violence together with much more uncertain international economic conditions since 1973 has wiped out many of the new industries attracted in the 50s and 60s. Under Thatcherism there was rapid decline of what industry remained and so by the end of the 1980s there were more people unemployed in Northern Ireland than employed in manufacturing.

There can be no denying the brutal realities of economic and social deprivation in Northern Ireland. In the last few years official figures of unemployment (an underestimate of the real extent of the problem) have ranged from 14-20% and the regional figures mask much higher figures in particular areas like Newry, Strabane and West Belfast. When economic expansion has occurred in the rest of the UK it has tended to widen the gap with Northern Ireland rather than promote growth in the province.

Gross earnings averaged £215 per week for full time male employees in April 1988, lower than any other region in the UK. GDP per person has consistently been less than 80% of that in the UK over the last decade. Fewer households in Northern Ireland have a washing machine, freezer or telephone compared to the rest of the UK. More people rely on social security and despite significant improvement in the 1980s the quality of housing is poorer than in other parts of the UK.

The capacity of working class people to struggle against such conditions has been undermined by the structural sectarian divisions which cut across class cleavages. Historically the basis for the state lay in a communal alliance between the Protestant landlord class and bourgeoisie with the Protestant working class in the towns and the tenant farmers and farm labourers in the countryside. This mobilisation was in part

based on the exclusion of Catholic labour from particular industries and occupations. It was these practised which created the basis for the contemporary situation where Catholics are more than 2.5 times likely to be unemployed than Protestants. There is a wide degree of consensus from the Northern Ireland Office to the Provos that the key question is that of communal disadvantage. In fact as long as the question is dealt with in this way the only result will be a continuation of an existing trend for an expanded public sector and Fair Employment legislation to create a new Catholic professional bourgeoisie while the conditions of a large sections of the Catholic and Protestant working class continue to deteriorate.

Historically the fundamental mistake of Labourism in Northern Ireland was to talk about class and ignore the issues of sectarian discrimination. Nowadays as the core elements of traditional class politics- the Protestant industrial bourgeoisie and industrial working class- shrink to vanishing point, a new form of mystification emerges which detaches religion from class and capitalism. Its manifestations include the FFA, and a whole range of "Community Relations" and "Cultural Traditions" programmes. A strategy for fair employment which raises no questions about the existing economic structures in Northern Ireland will benefit only the Catholic middle class. Similarly, in a situation where the education system is almost totally geared to producing the best A level results in the UK and the largest proportion of teenagers who leave school with no educational qualifications at all, anti-sectarian initiatives

will founder on the cynicism and rancour of those condemned to a future of cosmetic "training" schemes, low paid casual work and unemployment. Often the most virulent forms of sectarianism are manifested by those sections of the working class which are most deprived, most powerless both economically and politically. Only a political strategy which deals with the material conditions of these groups can hope to challenge sectarianism. Sectarianism is a class issue, it is integrally linked with the development and expansion of capitalist relations in Ireland. Its current forms cannot be attacked effectively except by a strategy which relates them to the deeper forms of class inequality that exist in Northern Ireland.

Ma Paddy O'Brien.

Father of Mentally Handicapped Daughter, Needs Gym.

Cheresham House have all the Facilities - Music Mats.

Title: South Down Special Olympics Club.

Maree Reisel [£1,000] Wants £4,000 + £1,000 to pay Staff for the year.

Meet Sat:

Wed 7-9pm

High Beam / Low Beam
Vaulting Horses / Cross Mats

32 children Run by 7 parents

Ms Gulling + Deelhaas
151 Captain's Rd. Fitchman,

2 children + 10th pay. in dept. 6/pts

Ma Jack O'Reilly, Community Welfare Officer.

[Diet Money]

Ref Michael Gulling

Ma Lenny Byrne 553619

162 Colcl Rd

Ref Walter Hyndant!

Need for Locking Aid.

Non Removable Aid. [Hinged Type]

To Get the Drive outside

160/162 Colcl Rd
Clarend

as it is emptying Shulley.

St

two schools from infants

Need
Remedial Teacher for - Seasons

a Special Teacher visits for

To get the File a

Write Back to Ma Byrne &

See what action do.